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Introduction: The Ecologies of Mobility

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Abstract

Environmentalism has almost always privileged what geographer Tim Cresswell refers to as a “sedentary metaphysics.” Cresswell defines this perspective as one that promotes “place, rootedness, spatial order, and belonging” (26), and one in which “mobility is seen as a threat” (42). The genre often referred to as nature writing often flaunts environmentalism’s affinity with a sedentary metaphysics in, for example, its sanctification of Henry David Thoreau ensconced in his austere cabin beside Walden Pond; of Robinson Jeffers in his lithic Tor House and Hawk Tower overlooking the Pacific Ocean; of Edward Abbey in his ramshackle trailer in the Utah desert; of Annie Dillard in her house “clamped to the side of Tinker Creek,” a dwelling that she compares to an “anchorite’s hermitage” (4). This house, Dillard states, “holds me at anchor to the rock bottom of the creek itself and it keeps me steadied in the current, as a sea anchor does” (4). “Clamped to the side,” “holds me at anchor,” “steadied in the current,” “anchorite’s hermitage”: Dillard’s phrases embody perfectly a sedentary metaphysics.

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Comments

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Introduction: The Ecologies of Mobility

Environmentalism has almost always privileged what geographer Tim Cresswell refers to as a “sedentarist metaphysics.” Cresswell defines this perspective as one that promotes “place, rootedness, spatial order, and belonging” (26), and one in which “mobility is seen as a threat” (42). The genre often referred to as nature writing often flaunts environmentalism’s affinity with a sedentarist metaphysics in (for example) its sanctification of Henry David Thoreau ensconced in his austere cabin beside Walden Pond; of Robinson Jeffers in his lithic Tor House and Hawk Tower overlooking the Pacific Ocean; of Edward Abbey in his ramshackle trailer in the Utah desert; of Annie Dillard in her house “clamped to the side of Tinker Creek,” a dwelling that she compares to an “anchorite’s hermitage” (Dillard 4). This house, Dillard states, “holds me at anchor to the rock bottom of the creek itself and it keeps me steadied in the current, as a sea anchor does” (4). “Clamped to the side,” “holds me at anchor,” “steadied in the current,” “anchorite’s hermitage”: Dillard’s phrases embody perfectly a sedentarist metaphysics.

Besides this connection between rootedness and the lives and writings of many of our most sanctified nature writers, contemporary environmentalism has other compelling reasons to be wary of movement and to instead promote immobility: the transportation sector serves as a major contributor to greenhouse gases and other harmful pollutants, as well as contributing to other environmental ills associated with the building of transportation infrastructure. As Fuglestedt et al. have stated: “Transportation is an important contributor to global emissions of many different gases and aerosols that can have an impact on climate and stratospheric ozone, either directly or indirectly” (4648).¹ The transport sector is a major contributor of particular harmful emissions such as nitrogen, carbon dioxide, volatile organic carbon, and black carbon.² Within the transport sector, road vehicles in particular have been estimated to dispense “75-80%

of all CO₂ emissions from transport” (Uherek et al 4773). Air and sea transport contribute relatively small amounts of greenhouse gasses – around 2% and 2.6%, respectively, of global annual totals – but those numbers are expected to rise in the coming decades as those industries expand.³ And although some people have found cause for celebration in how at least some sectors of society have successfully curtailed their greenhouse gas output, the transportation sector is not one of these.⁴ As one paper somberly declares, whereas transport now in the US and the EU is guilty of around 20-25% of global CO₂ emissions, by 2050 “as much as 30-50% [of total CO₂ emissions]...are projected to come from the transport sector” (Uherek et al 4790). In addition to contributing heavily to anthropogenic climate change, the construction of new roads and highways can lead to a throng of other environmental issues. As one recent study published in the journal *Nature* declares: “Roads penetrating into wilderness or frontier areas are a major proximate driver of habitat loss and fragmentation, wildfires, overhunting and other environmental degradation, often with irreversible impacts on ecosystems” (Laurance et al 229).

But are there some ways in which the antithesis of the sedentarist metaphysics – what Cresswell calls a “nomadic metaphysics” and that instead assigns a positive meaning to mobility, travel, and rootlessness – can align itself with, and possibly even further, some of the goals and values of environmentalism? Surely, many aspects of nature and of animal life embody well the ways in which a nomadic metaphysics “puts mobility first, has little time for notions of attachment to place, and revels in notions of flow, flux, and dynamism” (Cresswell 26). One need only think of the astonishingly long migrations of certain whales, fish, turtles, birds and butterflies to see that nature often privileges an excess of movement.⁵ Even Dillard, that apostle of an intimate knowledge of place (a knowledge that can often only come from a sustained

rootedness), can't help but acknowledge the flux and movement that suffuses the natural world all around her. Abundant mobility, in short, is perfectly natural, for at one point Dillard observes:

[N]ature is very much a now-you-see-it, now-you-don't affair. A fish flashes, then dissolves in the water before my eyes like so much salt. Deer apparently ascend bodily into heaven; the brightest oriole fades into leaves. These disappearances stun me into stillness and concentration. (18)

Of course, within the field of environmental humanities, as much as we might honor a sedentarist metaphysics by frequently teaching the writings of Thoreau, Abbey, or Dillard, and promoting those writings through our scholarship, we, as scholars, are often still quite wedded to a nomadic metaphysics. We travel by car and airplane to conduct research at archives, to give invited talks at other institutions, or to present papers at regional, national, and international conferences. The biennial ASLE conference, of course, is a frequent destination every other year for many of us interested in environmental approaches to textual studies. And although we might purchase carbon offsets to atone for the greenhouse gasses our travel has helped release into the atmosphere, we still, ultimately, make the journey to the conference site and, once there, often hop on those busses whisking us off on a half-day conference field trip to go birding or hike a trail in some nearby mountains.⁶

That last sentence gestures towards one of the central paradoxes lurking at the intersection of modern transportation and environmentalism. As Jonathan Rosen describes this contradiction: "We have been liberated – by the train, and the automobile and the airplane – to find [wild animals like] the birds of America for ourselves, even as these inventions have contributed to the fragmentation that endangers the very things we seek" (69). (Of course, as Kara Thompson shows in her contribution to this special cluster of essays, transportation – due to

its complicity in racism and other forms of institutionalized prejudice and inequality – only liberates *some* people.) Elsewhere, Rosen, who lives in central Manhattan, mentions visiting Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, a refuge straddling Brooklyn and Queens. In this place that is “accessible from [his] apartment by subway,” Rosen can see “ibises and egrets and snow geese” (7). Put another way, no matter how much environmentalists might not want to acknowledge it, the mechanical prosthesis of our transportation technologies makes possible a vast portion of our knowledge and direct experience of plants and animals and the wilder places of the world.

Or to borrow a term from the poststructuralist philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, we often require the creation of an “assemblage,” of one that merges human beings with transport technologies like cars, airplanes, and subways (as well as with technologies like binoculars, smartphone apps, scuba gear, bug spray, etc.) in order to understand and appreciate nature. For Deleuze and Guattari, the assemblage exists as a (often ephemeral) coalition of forces and/or bodies that enhances, or at least significantly alters, each member of that coalition’s powers and affects. As Deleuze and Guattari state:

We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or join with it in composing a more powerful body. (257)

The apparent liberation via our transportation technologies that Rosen references above enables industries like ecotourism to flourish, whereby we can have all of our travel planned for us and then be led out by experienced guides into the wild in order to (for example) scuba dive at the Great Barrier Reef, or to bicycle for a week across a stretch of Antarctica (after flying there

first from Chile).⁷ But as much as we might be able to observe sharks or commune with penguins while in such remote places, our car and airplane travel to get there only contribute to the greenhouse gasses that are now bleaching the coral reefs and melting the Antarctic ice sheets at such alarming rates.

We might think then that the solution to the unsavory environmental effects of our high-impact modes of transportation is to adopt more low-impact mobilities like cycling and walking, or when those are not feasible, public transportation. In particular, the bicycle, since its invention in the Victorian era, has been portrayed as an ideal form of machinery for putting people in touch with the more abundant animal and vegetal life found outside the city. We see the bicycle aiding in a (re)connection with nature, for example, in the 1897 novel *The Type-Writer Girl* by Grant Allen (writing as Olive Pratt Rayner). While riding out into the countryside beyond London one day in order to find an anarchist commune about which she overheard two men talking, the main character, Juliet, finds that the road around her has become “pink with blossom at that perfect moment of the year and heavy with lilac” (43). Additionally, she observes donkeys who “munched furze-tops and mused pessimism” (43). Later on in the novel, the bicycle provides so close a connection to nature that Juliet feels ownership of it, as if the “sky overhead is mine, mine...the scent of rain-wetted earth, the broken song of the thrushes, the startled scream of the jay as he bursts through the rustling oak-leaves” (109).

However, any assumption that transportation technologies like bikes are inherently nature-friendly and conducive to an amiable human connection with nature needs to be destabilized. For example, some cycling historians in recent years have highlighted the unsustainable nature of the bicycle in terms of its material production. Scholars such as Paul Rosen has reminded us that the bicycle industry, like any other industry, is certainly complicit in

rampant pollution and over-consumption of resources. Writing about the widely distributed nature of the cycling industry since the 1980s, Rosen argues that such distribution “raises questions about the global environment, since a globally dispersed industry uses a substantial amount of energy to transport raw materials, parts, and finished goods from their place of origin to manufacturing centers and eventually to their final destination” (*Framing Production* 172). Furthermore, some bicycle manufacturers engage in unpalatable capitalistic practices like “built-in obsolescence and opaque product design” (Rosen, “Up the Véloration,” 374), practices that work against sustainability by attempting to inspire (or compel) cyclists to purchase new bikes and new bike parts on a regular basis, even when such purchases are not necessary. Lastly, Rosen points out the paradox lurking at the heart of most people’s cycling practices whereby they use their bikes for weekend outings – that is, loading up the bikes in a car and then driving them out to a “suitably remote spot free from the traffic that such trips have themselves helped to generate” (*Framing Production* 167) – rather than using bikes a form of everyday, sustainable transportation for commuting to work, running one’s errands, and so forth.

And just like the above paragraph problematizes a quick, easy connection between “green” transportation like the bicycle and the values of environmentalism, we can, additionally, complicate the idea that modes of transport like automobiles, trains, ships, and airplanes always involve a problematic severing of the human from the nonhuman worlds. As Peter Soppelsa argues in his essay in here, the shift from one mode of transportation to another (what Soppelsa calls the shift from one “energy regime” to another) might mean a liberation of sorts for one aspect of nature – equine life – at the same time as it means the beginning of a more large-scale exploitation of another aspect of nature – coal and oil deposits. To be sure, it is worth emphasizing again that, of course, such high-impact modes of transport as cars and planes are

anything but environmentally and socially benign. They each do immense harm to our ecosystems and our communities. As Christopher Schaberg shows in his contribution to this special cluster, air travel and its advertisements promote human exceptionalism and contribute to what Schaberg calls “ecological disorientation.”

But, like Jonathan Rosen does above in his reference to using the New York City subway system in order to find, observe, and learn about the avian world around him, various other texts have also pointed out that a deeper understanding and appreciation of – and (possibly) a heightened sense of concern for – the natural world can be greatly assisted by our energy-guzzling and habitat-razing transportation machines. Within literature, this expansion of one’s familiarity with animals and ecosystems that is aided by transportation technologies can be seen (for example) in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851). Although the whaling ship in that novel – the *Pequod* – is described as a vessel “of the old school...with an old-fashioned claw-footed look about her” (61), the aging ship has still been renovated into a craft capable of carrying out whaling on an unprecedented, global scale. Its massive fiery tryworks affixed to the deck of the ship, for instance, allow it to operate as a mobile factory staying out at sea for years on end. However, even though the *Pequod* metes out industrial slaughter of whales (and sharks) across the world’s oceans, the ship is also, clearly, a vehicle fostering the education of former land-dwellers like Ishmael on the complexity and intricacy of cetacean life. At one point, in a burst of condemnation of those who try to understand whales only by looking at skeletons of them in museums, Ishmael fulminates:

How vain and foolish, then, thought I, *for timid untraveled man* to try to comprehend aright this wonderous whale, by merely poring over his dead attenuated skeleton...[.] No. Only in the heart of quickest perils; only when within

the eddyings of his angry flukes; only on the profound unbounded sea, can the fully invested whale be truly and livingly found out. (405, emphasis added)

As Ishmael knows, in order to experience firsthand how whales “intelligently convers[e] with the world” (339) and thus how they display a form of subjectivity through their sophisticated animal language, or in order to have a Levinasian encounter with the faces of cetacean calves who peer up at you as they suckle their mothers and look around “as human infants” (347) do, one must utilize a mode of transport like the whaling ship.⁸ Although certainly on one level a means for rapacious destruction, the ship and its mobility – like that of cars, trains, subways, and airplanes – can merge with people in order to create a human-boat assemblage that works to foster a deeper knowledge of the intricate behavior of nonhuman life, a knowledge that, hopefully, culminates in an increased sense of moral consideration for that life (although Ishmael himself shows little evidence in *Moby Dick* of such an increase).⁹

Even though Melville’s novel is sometimes interpreted as an indictment of the dehumanizing effects of modern industrialism, perhaps none other than Edward Abbey serves as the most perfect embodiment of a keen hatred of modernity and that industrialization.¹⁰ In particular, Abbey targets modernity’s preference for motorized transportation: forms of mobility that Abbey often maligns as leading to what he calls “industrial tourism.” In his celebrated *Desert Solitaire* (1968) – about his experiences as a seasonal ranger in Arches National Monument (now Arches National Park) in Utah – Abbey at one point bemoans the appearance of a survey crew who are “laying out a new road into the Arches” (43), a road sure to bring hordes of “motorized tourists” (42) into the beloved seclusion of his park. However, despite such disdain for motorized transportation, *Desert Solitaire* portrays Abbey as availing himself of a prosthetic mobility in order to explore and protect the park, as well as the surrounding desert

environment. For example, one early chapter – “Cliffrose and Bayonets” – portrays Abbey’s mobility as he makes his daily rounds in the park as consistently shifting between that of a walker and hiker, and that of a pickup truck driver. Rather than interfering with his observation and exploration of Arches, a modern form of transport like the truck appears only to aid and enhance such activities. Abbey writes:

I drive past more free-standing pinnacles, around the edge of outthrust ledges, in and out of the ravines that corrade the rolling terrain – wind-deposited, cross-bedded sand dunes laid down eons ago in the Mesozoic era and since compressed and petrified by overlying sediments. Everywhere the cliff-rose is blooming, the yellow flowers shivering in the wind. (30)

Like Ishmael with his ship-assisted knowledge of whales, Abbey employs his own prosthesis – the pickup truck – in order to create his own assemblage for gleaning a more nuanced understanding of the features and processes that shape and define the desert around him. And despite his calls later on for people “to lock up their automobiles and continue their tour [of Arches] on the seats of good workable bicycles” (53), and despite his journey down the Colorado River near the end of *Desert Solitaire* in a primitive rubber boat, Abbey here (and elsewhere in his book) employs the motorized mobility of the truck in order to enhance his ability to know, revere, and protect the park and its desert landscape.

What the essays in this special cluster will examine, then, is the different ecologies that are created or destabilized by our various modes of mobility. The essays discuss a range of representations depicting modern transportation technologies of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries as both useful prostheses to human mobility capable of positively influencing our relationship to plants, animals, and ecosystems of various kinds, as well as discussing the ways in which our

modes of transport can often be a means to problematic textual constructions of nature and to our outright harmful behavior towards it. Similar to Ishmael's experiences aboard the whaling ship in *Moby Dick*, this cluster's various contributors consider the range of ways in which driving, flying, cycling, walking, and so forth can be a way to devalue, distort, or destroy the natural world, and a way in which such forms of mobility can be ways to "truly and livingly" encounter and know that world.

Notes

¹ As another article points out, not only does transport directly effect climate change, but climate change in turn will likely directly and seriously put transport at risk. For example, this risk may involve "flood events put[ting] rail, port, and airport operations under significant pressures" (Mashayekh 2530).

² See Fuglestedt et al 4649.

³ On the air industry, see Fountain, "Rethinking the Airplane," and Fountain, "Taming Carbon Emissions."

⁴ For example, the energy sector is seen by at least one source to have reined in its greenhouse gas emissions "between 1990 and 2005...by 6%, whereas the transport sector's share rose by 35%" (Lepert and Brillet 576).

⁵ For example, humpback whales, sockeye salmon, leatherback turtles, Arctic terns, and monarch butterflies each make some of the longest migrations in the animal kingdom (with the Arctic tern credited with making *the* longest migration of any animal, flying from Greenland and Iceland to Antarctica and back as part of its annual migration route).

⁶ On carbon footprints and conferences, see Spinellis and Louridas. Given the unavoidable carbon footprint of putting on any conference, some people have been calling for academics to move towards doing more online, virtual conferences.

⁷ The bicycling trip in Antarctica comes with the staggeringly steep price tag of \$75,000. On the Antarctic cycling trip, see Tramuta. On the precarious situation in Antarctica, see DeConto and Pollard.

⁸ On the importance of "the face" to Levinas's ethics, see the excerpted interview with Levinas in *Animal Philosophy*, 49-50.

⁹ The novel overall, however, does suggest moments of concern for whales and human accountability for them. Buell, for example, describes the *Pequod's* first killing of whale as an account employing language that "is traumatic, not triumphal." Also, *Moby Dick* does, somewhat surprisingly given its time period, raise the specter of whale extinction, although Buell argues the book raises the endangerment question "only to dismiss it" ultimately. See Buell, 208, 210.

¹⁰ On *Moby Dick* and the negative effects of industrialization, see Buell 208-212.

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